

# 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY GENOCIDE

## BACKGROUND & CAUSES

### 1. Define genocide.

Genocide is defined as the systematic killing of all or a significant part of a racial, ethnic, religious, or national group. The term was coined in 1944 and international law forbidding genocide was developed in 1946, after the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed. Throughout the 20th century, there have been at least four well-known attempts at genocide – Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, and the Holocaust.

### 2. What are the 8 stages of genocide?

In 1996, researchers published eight stages that they believe lead to genocide. This was developed in order to prevent genocides before they reach mass extermination. The first step is classification where people are divided into “us and them”. This can mean different things depending on where it happens. Next, symbolization, where those classified as “them” may be forced to wear some kind of symbol to be easily identified. Then, dehumanization as the group defined as “us” begins to dehumanize the other group by treating them as equals to animals, vermin, or even diseases. The next step is to the organization of a special army units or militias to lead the charge against the dehumanized group. Then, polarization where we find that propaganda will be increased in order to broadcast the hate for the other group and to rally people around this belief. Next, we see a preparation for mass killing where the victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identify. Then, extermination happens. It is viewed as extermination by the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human. The final stage of genocide is denial because the perpetrators often deny that they committed any crimes. This article will examine 4 genocides of the 20th century through the lens of these 8 stages.

## EVENTS & PROCESS

### THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, 1909-1918

### 3. When was the Armenian genocide?

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire, located in modern day Turkey and surrounding countries, was ruled by an Islamic ruler called a Caliph. Minority religious communities, such as Christian Armenians, were allowed to maintain their religion, but were often subjected to extra taxes. Many Armenians were merchants and industrialists, which historians say, made them appear better off in many ways than their Turkish neighbors who were usually peasants, low-wage government workers, or soldiers. By the turn of the century, the Ottoman Empire, once far-flung and powerful, was crumbling due to revolts and wars. Things were not good. In March of 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of Germany. They attacked to the east, hoping to capture the city of Baku in what would be a disastrous campaign against Russian forces where they were soundly defeated.

### 4. Why were the Armenians targeted in Turkey?

Armenians in the area were blamed for siding with the Russians and the Young Turks who ruled the Ottoman Empire classified them as the enemy. Armenians were not given symbols for identification, but they were dehumanized extensively throughout the eastern portion of the empire. The Young Turks organized a special organization that assisted with the deportation of Armenians. Extensive propaganda was used to turn the Turks against the Armenians. Starting in April of 1915, the organization of mass murder began with mass deportations of Armenians to various camps. Also enacted was the right to confiscate Armenian property and to slaughter Armenians. In attempts to exterminate, the Turks had thousands of Armenians march to Syria. The New York Times reported in August of 1915 that “the roads are strewn with corpses of exiles, and those who survive are doomed to certain death. It is a plan to exterminate the whole Armenian people.” A network of 25 concentration camps was set up by the Ottoman government to dispose of Armenians who had survived the deportations.



**5. How many Armenians died and how do we know?**

While there is no consensus on how many Armenians lost their lives during the Armenian Genocide, scholars estimate that somewhere between 500,000 and 1.5 million Armenians lost their lives between 1914 and 1918. Since the Young Turks did not keep accurate accounts, historians rely on eyewitness accounts and testimony from survivors. There is a strong sentiment of denial from the state of Turkey of the magnitude and atrocity of the Armenian genocide. The Republic of Turkey's formal stance is that the deaths of Armenians during the "relocation" and "deportation" cannot be deemed "genocide" because the killings were justified based on the threat the Armenians posed by sympathizing with the Russians and that the Armenians "merely starved to death". Today, there is an on-going effort for countries to recognize these events as genocide. In response, 22 countries, including 43 US states, have adopted resolutions that acknowledge this as a genocide.

## **THE HOLOCAUST, 1933-1945**

**6. Who was killed during the Holocaust?**

The Holocaust was a genocide in which approximately 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jewish victims were killed by the Nazi regime of Germany and its collaborators. From 1933-1945, every part of the Nazi state was involved in the targeting and mass murder of these 11 million men, women, and children. Jews were the primary target, however the non-Jewish victims included Gypsies, Poles (those from Poland), communists, homosexuals, Soviet Prisoners of War, and the mentally and physically disabled. Approximately two-thirds of the 9 million Jews living in Europe at the time were killed.

**7. Define anti-semitism.**

Anti-Semitism, or the discrimination of Jews, had been around in Europe for hundreds, if not thousands of years, however it was reinvigorated with the rise of the Nazis and Adolf Hitler. After World War I, the Treaty of Versailles which ended the war, was extremely harsh toward the Germans. It required that Germans take the entire blame for the war and that they pay heavy reparations, or fines. Just ten years after the war, the world fell into the Great Depression. The depression severely affected Germany because they were borrowing money from the US to pay these reparations, but the US had to stop the loans as the depression worsened. The economic strains of the Great Depression led German social policy to become – "save the racially valuable and rid society of the racially undesirable".

**8. Why did the Nazis target the Jews?**

In 1933, Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany. Hitler had been very public about his anti-semitic beliefs. His book, *Mein Kampf*, explains in detail his hatred of Jews and his hope for their eradication. The Jews had been classified as the enemy and through a set of laws called the Nuremberg Laws, introduced in 1935, Jews were prohibited from many basic rights. Beginning in 1941, Jews were forced to wear a symbol of a yellow star on all of their clothing in order to be easily identified as Jewish. The dehumanization of the Jews happened throughout the 1930s. Jews were not just seen as an enemy of the state, but instead as vermin and a plague on society. Jews were excluded more and more from German society. Nazi propaganda was severe and extreme. Joseph Goebbels, the head of propaganda, initiated an intense campaign of anti-semitism that pushed non-Jews to not only cease any contact with Jews or Jewish owned businesses, but to be supportive of anti-semitic laws and eventually, the arrests and deportations of the Jews.



**9. How were the Nazis organized?**

The Nazis were extremely organized throughout their reign. The S.S. were the German officers, under the command of Heinrich Himmler, that carried out the laws and actions of the Nazi Party. The Nazis kept detailed records of arrests, deportations, property confiscations, and deaths. From 1933-1939, the main focus of Nazi persecution of the Jews was on intimidation, taking money and property, and encouraging Jews to leave Europe. The goal was to rid Europe of the Jews themselves while taking all of their possessions. However, by 1941, the Nazis controlled most of Europe and therefore had millions of more Jews living within their reign. Between 1939 and 1941, the Nazis organized mass killings of Jews, especially in nations they had conquered such as Poland. Labor camps had been set up throughout Germany and Poland for Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners were forced to work in brutal conditions to boost the Nazis war effort. Many were worked to death in these camps, but the intention of the camps was forced labor, not death.

**10. What was the Final Solution?**

In 1941, the Nazi government began to come up with a plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe. This became known as the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Nearly one million Jews were killed before the plans for the Final Solution were fully implemented in 1942, but it was only with the decision to actually annihilate, or completely destroy the entire Jewish population that extermination camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka were constructed with gas chambers to kill large numbers of Jews in a relatively short period of time.

**11. How did the gas chambers work?**

Over five million Jews were killed between 1942 and 1945 with the use of the gas chambers. After traveling for days stuffed into a train, deportees would arrive at these camps, be sorted into two lines based on those who could work on the right and those who could not on the left (usually children, elderly, and the sick were sent to the left), and the left line was sent into what looked like a shower room. They were asked to strip and told they would be taking a shower. Once all of their possessions were gathered, the doors were locked and lethal gas was dropped into the room, which would kill everyone in there in a matter of minutes. Their bodies were then burned in a crematorium. Sometimes whole groups of deportees were exterminated without being separated. Other times, the S.S. would take an entire barrack, or house, within the camp and lead them to the gas chambers. Because very few prisoners ever escaped these camps, most outside of the camps were unaware of what went on, but they knew that if you were sent to those places, you were unlikely to return.

By the spring of 1945, the S.S. knew that the Soviets and Americans were advancing quickly toward the camps. They would take every prisoner from the camp and march them toward Germany as German forces were retreating. These marches were known as death marches, because the purpose of them was not to move the prisoners, but to kill as many as possible in the final days of war. If you stopped walking, you were shot. If you tripped, you could be shot. You marched and marched for

days on end with no food or water after being in the camps for months without adequate food or medical resources. Some survived these marches, others did not.



**12. What were death marches?**

Soviet troops in the east and American troops in the west began to reach both death and labor camps set up by the Nazis during the spring of 1945. What they found there was absolutely horrendous. There were survivors in the camps that looked like skeletons barely standing. There were also piles of bodies that had yet to be burned, some of the bodies were just around the camp right where they

fell. Nazi denial of these camps and of their plans to exterminate the Jews began right away. Most of the top ranking officials committed suicide as the end of the war became inevitable. Others who were arrested would say that they were just carrying out orders and that they did not know of larger plans. Today, there are some groups of people around the world who deny that Holocaust happened for various reasons.

**13. Where did the most Jews die?**

While there are events in history where more people have died, the Holocaust is generally accepted as one of the most organized and systematic mass murders that has ever occurred. The Nazis complete dehumanization of Jews and other non-Aryan, or people who were not a perfect blonde-haired, blue-eyed German, led to the destruction of over 11 million people. In nations including Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), estimates of 80-90% of the Jewish population were killed. Although the goal of annihilating the Jews was not reached, the number of murder victims during the Holocaust make this a unique crime in the history of mankind.

**CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE, 1975-1979**

In the 1960s, civil war was raging in Vietnam with democratic south (backed by the US) fighting off the communist north, led by Ho Chi Minh. After a US-backed leader came to power in Cambodia, the US began to bomb Cambodia where they suspected the North Vietnamese Viet Cong hideouts to be. Over 750,000 Cambodians were killed in this effort. Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia and his followers joined forces with a communist guerrilla organization founded in 1960 and known as the Khmer Rouge. They attacked Lon Nol's (the president of Cambodia) army and civil war began.

**14. Who was Pol Pot?**

By 1975 the Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, had grown to over 700,000 men. Lon Nol's army was kept busy trying to suppress the North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge. In 1975 North Vietnamese forces seized South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. In the same year Lon Nol was defeated by the Khmer Rouge. It's estimated that 156,000 died in the civil war - half of them civilians.

Under Pol Pot's leadership, and within days of overthrowing the government, the Khmer Rouge embarked on an organized mission: they ruthlessly imposed an extremist program to reconstruct

Cambodia (now under its Khmer name Kampuchea) on the communist model of Mao's China. The population must, they believed, be made to work as laborers in one huge federation of collective farms. Anyone in opposition - and all intellectuals and educated people were assumed to be - must be eliminated, together with all un-communist aspects of traditional Cambodian society.



**15. Who was targeted in Cambodia?**

So, at short notice and under threat of death, the inhabitants of towns and cities were forced to leave them. The ill, disabled, old and very young were driven out as well, regardless of their physical condition: no-one was spared the exodus. People who refused to leave were killed; so were those who didn't leave fast enough, and those who wouldn't obey orders.

**16. What sorts of things were banned in Cambodia?**

All political and civil rights were abolished. Children were taken from their parents and placed in separate forced labour camps. Factories, schools, and universities were shut down; so were hospitals. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists and professional people in any field (including the army) were murdered, together with their extended families. Religion was banned, all leading Buddhist monks were killed and almost all temples destroyed. Music and radio sets were also banned. It was possible for people to be shot simply for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses, laughing, or crying.

People who escaped murder became unpaid laborers, working on minimum rations and for impossibly long hours. They slept and ate in uncomfortable communes deliberately chosen to be as far as possible from their old homes. Personal relationships were discouraged; so were expressions of affection. People soon became weak from overwork and starvation, and after that fell ill, for which there was no treatment except death.

Also targeted were minority groups, victims of the Khmer Rouge's racism. These included ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, and also Cambodians with Chinese, Vietnamese, or Thai ancestry. Half the Cham Muslim population was murdered, and 8,000 Christians.

**17. Why did the Khmer Rouge interrogate its own members?**

The imposition of a murderous regime always leaves its leaders afraid: afraid of losing power, failing to prevent vengeance, and facing betrayal by ambitious rivals. The Khmer Rouge repeatedly interrogated their own members, imprisoning and executing them on the slightest suspicion of treachery or sabotage. Civilian deaths in this period, from executions, disease, exhaustion and starvation, have been estimated at well over 2 million. Of course, Pol Pot and his followers vehemently denied the genocide. However, as of 2013, it is illegal in Cambodia to deny these crimes.

**RWANDAN GENOCIDE, 1993- 1994**

**18. Who were the Hutus & Tutsis?**

Most of the Rwandan population belonged to the Hutu ethnic group, traditionally crop-growers. For many centuries Rwanda attracted Tutsis - traditionally herdsmen - from northern Africa. For 600 years the two groups shared the business of farming, which was essential for survival. They have also shared their language, their culture, and their nationality. There have been many intermarriages.

**19. Who targeted who in Rwanda?**

Because of the nature of their historical pastoral or agricultural roles, Tutsis tended to be landowners and Hutus the people who worked the land; and this division of labor perpetuated a population balance in which Hutus naturally outnumbered Tutsis. A wedge was driven between them when the European colonists moved in. It was the practice of colonial administrators to select a group to be privileged and educated 'intermediaries' between governor and governed. The Belgians chose the Tutsis: landowners, tall, and to European eyes the more aristocratic in appearance. This thoughtless

introduction of class consciousness unsettled the stability of Rwandan society. Some Tutsis began to behave like aristocrats, and the Hutu to feel treated like peasants. A political divide was born.

In 1962, Rwanda gained independence and a politically inexperienced Hutu government began to face internal conflicts as well. Tensions grew between communities. Tutsi resistance was continually nurtured by repressive measures against them (in 1973, for example, they were excluded from secondary schools and the university). In 1990 RPF rebels (Tutsis) seized the moment and attacked: civil war began.



**20. What triggered the genocide in Rwanda?**

A ceasefire was achieved in 1993, followed by UN-backed efforts to negotiate a new multi-party constitution; but Hutu leaders and extremists fiercely opposed any Tutsi involvement in government.

On April 6 1994 the plane carrying Rwanda's president was shot down, almost certainly the work of an extremist. This was the trigger needed for the Hutus' planned 'Final Solution' to go into operation. The Tutsis were accused of killing the president, and Hutu civilians were told, by radio and word of mouth, that it was their duty to wipe the Tutsis out. First, though, moderate Hutus who weren't anti-Tutsi should be killed. So should Tutsi wives or husbands. Genocide began.

**21. How was this genocide different than others?**

Up to a million people died before the RPF (some of whose personnel are Hutu) was able to take full control. Unlike the genocides of Armenians and of Jews, no-one tried to keep the genocide in Rwanda a secret. Journalists and television cameras reported what they saw, or what they found when the genocide was over. But the genocide organizers were conscious of the risks of international scrutiny: over the radio the killers were constantly incited to continue, but 'No more corpses on the roads, please'. Corpses in the countryside were covered with banana leaves to screen them from aerial photography.

**22. What was the general method of killing in Rwanda?**

Although on a large scale, this genocide was carried out entirely by hand, often using machetes and clubs. Local officials assisted in rounding up victims and making suitable places available for their slaughter. Tutsi men, women, children and babies were killed in the thousands in schools. They were also killed in churches: some clergy colluded in the crime. The victims, in their last moments alive, were also faced by another appalling fact: their cold-blooded killers were people they knew - neighbors, colleagues, former friends, sometimes even relatives through marriage. Few survived.



## CONCLUSION

It is commonly accepted that, at least since World War II, genocide has been illegal under international law. Acts of genocide, however, are often difficult to establish for prosecution because a chain of accountability must be established. International criminal courts and tribunals function primarily because the states involved are incapable or unwilling to prosecute crimes of this magnitude.

**23. What happened at the Nuremberg trials?**

In the years after WWII, declarations of human rights coined terms such as genocide and crimes against humanity. The Nuremberg trials after the war included prosecution against 24 leaders of the Nazi party. Of these men, 14 were sentenced to death and 12 of those were carried out through hanging. Trials to convict the persecutors in both Rwanda and Cambodia have taken place, which worked to prosecute those charged with crimes against humanity from both genocides. Similar trials, although not as internationally organized, took place in Turkey following World War I. Although genocide is now internationally recognized and condemned, genocides can and have occurred in recent memory. What remains difficult is to officially recognize mass murder as a genocide and for there to be international intervention to prevent these crimes.